

EFL Situations and Basic Considerations for English Education

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Concerns: EFL teaching in general (Teaching 4 skills, grammar, and pronunciation in EFL situations, especially in SOV languages)



Summary

Japan is very similar to Korea in terms of language structure and English learning and teaching environment. It is often observed in our countries that internationally well-known English teaching techniques fail to work. That is, a lot of methods that work quite well in ESL countries are found not to work in EFL situations. This suggests that we must develop theories and techniques for our own situations and this should be done by ourselves. Theories developed by ESL experts in ESL situations are references we can look into for some ideas; most of them are not something we should import at high price and apply to our children without criticism, to say the least.

In this presentation, I would like to address some EFL education issues, and share some of my ideas with you for more effective English learning and teaching.

I. EFL relative to ESL

Characteristics of the EFL situation:

1. Lack of opportunity for practicing English outside the classroom
 2. Students' low motivation for learning English
 3. L1 relative to L2 tends to be not strongly emphasized
 4. Teaching tends to be extensive than to be intensive
 5. Lack of class hours
 6. The class size tends to be large
 7. No 'English through English'
 8. Teaching tends to be grammar-oriented because of the 'College Qualification Exams'
 9. Students tend to be shy when using English
- Etc.

II. What we need to know about language learning

2.1. The minimal unit of the sentence is phrases, not words

Most English learners and teachers conceive of sentences as a construction of words (i.e. sentences are made of words). It is true that sentences ARE constructed with words. I believe, however, that this seemingly straightforward fact does not help teachers and learners of English as a foreign language at all. There are at least two reasons for this.

First, words themselves do not provide information about how to make sentences. Therefore, learners'

having many vocabulary items in their mind hardly means that they are ready to speak English with any fluency, to speak of. On the other hand, phrases, including minimal sentences, carry information about structures (i.e. grammar). Learners who have many English phrases as single units in mind are probably ready to speak English with some fluency. We can be helped to understand this by the observation that even very low level students can say and understand *How are you?*, *Nice to meet you*, *My name is ...*, because these expressions are stored in their brain as a single unit.

Second, normally, language is processed in our brain based on phrases, or thought groups, not words. If the processing is word-based, we can hardly speak fluently because the capacity of our ‘working memory’ is quite limited (7±2 units in testing; but only 3-5 units in real conversational situations (Sohn 2004)). For example, learners who can say *How are you?* easily, very often take much longer when they are asked to say *How is she?* That is because they had to compose the sentence by weaving the three separate words (*how*, *is*, *she*) grammatically. When the number of words to be used is more than 5, the situation becomes far tougher to handle. Students who could say *What’s that?*, and *on the table* easily, often cannot say *What’s that on the table?* easily (see below for information structure of English).

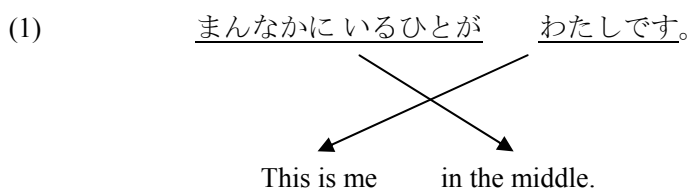
Grammar teaching in EFL countries still tends to be bottom-up, focusing on grammatical details. This has been proven to be not very effective for 4 skill building, especially listening and speaking. It should be noted that bottom-up teaching very often drags learners from the phrase or higher level of language processing down to the word-level. The word-level hardly enables us to process for normal listening and speaking (refer to the working memory mentioned above). Top-down grammar teaching, on the other hand, stresses that big units (i.e. thought groups) should be taken in first and then look into them for grammatical structuring.

For effectiveness of learning English, the idea that sentences are composed of words should be abandoned. Teachers need to encourage students to conceive a sentence as a construction made of phrases representing a thought group. With this new conception, there could be a little revolution in English learning. In primary schools, this revolution can begin with taking the word cards off the classroom walls. These grammar-bleached words should be replaced with sentences (e.g. ‘apple’ → ‘It’s an apple.’). In terms of language processing, school children are already on the sentence level. That they are at the beginning of learning English never means that they should start with words. They ARE ready to play with sentences already.

2.2. The sense of ‘phrase order’ is more important than the sense of word order

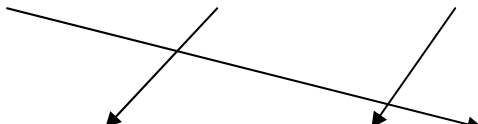
Switching O-V (Japanese) into V-O (English) is relatively simple and easy for learners to process, but switching the phrase order is what most of them are not familiar with. For example, students find it hard to say ‘まんなかに いるひとが わたしです’ in English in spite of the fact that they can say *This is me*, and *in the middle* respectively without difficulty. They find it harder to say ‘あしたのあさにあなたはなにをきてがっこうにいきますか?’ in English even if they already know *What are you going to wear*, *to school*, and *tomorrow morning* separately. How come?

Most grammar books do not provide students with direct information about what it means by ‘Think in English.’ Specifically, they do not show what thought group (phrase) comes first and what comes next when students translate L1 information into English. Consider the examples (1-2) below:



(2) あしたのあさに あなたはなにをきて がっこうにいきますか?

What are you going to wear to school tomorrow morning?



In (1), ‘わたしです’ (*This is me*) becomes the sentential focus in English and comes first. ‘まんなかにいるひとが’ is translated into a prepositional phrase (*in the middle*), although the Japanese expression is a relative clause. In (2), the focus is ‘がっこうにいきますか?’ So *What are you going to wear* comes first. And the ‘going to school’ part, which normally needs a verb in Japanese (and Korean), is translated simply into a prepositional phrase *to school* because the preposition *to* implies the concept of movement and direction. Finally, temporal and spatial expressions, which come at the beginning in our countries, normally come last in English.

Let’s take one more example, which seems like a complex structure.

(3) わたしはどうろにおおきいいぬがいつぴきたっているのをみました。

Here, the focus will be ‘わたしはおおきいいぬをいつぴきみました’ And this, one thought group, does not need much practice to be able to translate: *I saw a big dog*. If students can grasp this focus expression, presumably the rest will not be very difficult for them to handle: *standing on the road/street* or simply *on the road/street*.

2.3. What is ‘Think in English’?: How to look at English sentences.

The examples of English information structure given above are part of ‘Think in English.’ Here I would like to briefly talk about how to look at English sentences in order to see what ‘Think in English’ is.

The easiest way is asking 2 questions:

Which L1 information comes first in English? That is, which L1 information becomes SVO part in English?

How is the rest of the L1 information translated into English?

For the answers, learners are advised to look at L1 first and then look at English, not the other way round. In SOV languages like Japanese and Korean, typically the last part (i.e. OV) of the L1 sentence becomes the first part (i.e. VO) in English. Precisely, however, what comes first is the focus part, which is sometimes in the middle of the L1 sentence (see the example (2) above).

Roughly, there are 5 post-SVO patterns. That is, the non-SOV part in L1 is processed in 5 ways in English:

A prepositional phrase (The most frequent and important way; around 70%)

Who’s that **in the red shirt**? (‘in’ already implies ‘wearing’)

An adverb phrase

I visit my parents **every Saturday**.

An infinitive phrase

I’m glad **to have many friends**.

A participial phrase

I’m busy **doing my homework**.

A clause

I’m happy **you passed the exam**.

2.4. The topic-based vs. function-based course design

While teaching English, I have felt that most students had not been taught to pay attention to communicative functions in their English classes. And I have concluded that, as far as oral proficiency is concerned, personalizing tens of communicative functions would be far more effective than memorizing thousands of words or being exposed to hundreds of sentences.

Generally accepted designs of current English teaching seem to be topic-based. It should be pointed out that topic-based designs often do not work well in EFL situations because most students are low or low-intermediate as far as their oral skills are concerned.

One characteristic of the topic-based practice is that communicative functions tend to be scattered over the lesson units, and therefore not intensive. In this (EFL) situation, students very often take each sentence as a formulaic, idiom-like expression. Very productive expressions like *It's nice to meet you*, *What's your name?*, *What time is it?*, *What day is it?*, *How are you?*, etc. are memorized as idiom-like ones by many students. Thus, it is observed that all students can say *(It's) nice to meet you*, but many students find it difficult to say *It's nice to talk to you*, *It's nice to have many friends*, etc. This is why learners of EFL, up to a certain level, need to take more time to drill substitution and application than learners in ESL countries, and this is where a function-based design can work effectively.

Of course, teachers need to raise students' awareness of communicative functions and the structures representing them in order to avoid passive mechanical repetitions. Mechanical repetitions without thinking have been proven inefficient. Many teachers try substitution(-like) activities in their class but fail to encourage their students to be aware of the functions and their structural realizations.

Basically, same communicative functions tend to be expressed with an identical structure. Asking and stating plans, for example, can be realized as follows:

- (4) a. What are you going to do after class? — I'm going to drink a cup of coffee.
- b. Who are you going to talk to? — I'm going to talk to my brother.
- c. Why are you going to do that? — Because I'm going to win the game.
- d. Where are you going to meet your friends? — I'm going to meet them at the cafeteria.
- e. When are you going to have lunch? — I'm going to have lunch at 1:00.
- f. How are you going to go to Seoul? — I'm going to take the train.

Here, learners are led to become aware that the 'be going to V' structure is used when they ask about the other's plans or state theirs. Learners need to know not only the structure (i.e. grammar), but also its communicative function. In my view, one of the serious problems of Grammar-Translation Method in the past, at least in EFL countries, was that it had failed to teach how structures are used to express communicative functions.

This 'traditional' drill may not seem attractive. One way to get a balance of the topic-based and function-based teaching would be to create a natural dialogue in which this function is 'flooding'. The following is an example:

(5) Bill: Hey, Tim. What are going to do after school today?

Tim: I think I'm going to see a movie. But before that, I'm going to have dinner.

Do you want to come with me?

Bill: Fine with me. Thanks. Where are you going to go for dinner?

Tim: I was going to go to Burger King next to the theater. What do you think?

Bill: No problem. What are you going to have at Burger King?

Tim: I'm going to have a Whopper. How about you? What are you going to have?

Bill: Well, I'm going to try a Whopper Jr. By the way, how are we going to get there?

Tim: I don't want to drive. The traffic's going to be heavy today. I was going to take the subway.

Bill: Good idea. See you after class.

Tim: See you then. Bye.

Up to a certain level (e.g. to the low-intermediate level), I believe this kind of function-flooding dialogues would work for EFL learners better than ESL dialogues in which several functions are included and thus hard for them to focus on. EFL learners first need to personalize how to make use of basic structures representing basic communicative functions. That is, they need to equip with a sentence-making device to begin with as soon as possible. It is like we have to memorize multiplication table (九九段) and learn basic arithmetic skills before starting mathematics. In this sense, teaching EFL should be an intensive focus on function and form, rather than extensive exposure to a variety of topics. Topic-based teaching will work at advanced levels.

III. Conclusion

If we understand that most theories of English education have developed in ESL countries, it is natural to say that we need to be very careful when we apply them to EFL countries. They should be examined and reinterpreted in terms of EFL, especially in terms of our own situations. In order to develop EFL-effective theories of our own, we should keep asking “What are our linguistic and non-linguistic situations relative to ESL?” and “What do they really mean to us?”

In this brief presentation, I have suggested some ideas for more effective teaching and learning of English in Japan (and Korea). I believe that these ideas are very fundamental in EFL teaching and learning; whatever approach we adopt, we should consider them before we teach.

It is not theory, but reality that is important. Sometimes even Grammar-Translation Method can work for us with some modernization. (Notice that communicative approaches have recently abandoned their idea of ‘no need to teach grammar’ and accepted a high necessity of teaching grammar.)

Finally, as almost identical EFL countries, I hope that we will have chances to cooperate and develop good EFL teaching methods of our own.